

NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Sept. 12, 2006

Three Militant Animal Rights Activists Sentenced to Between Four and Six Years in Prison

(More)

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TRENTON, N.J. – A judge today sentenced three members of the militant animal rights group SHAC to federal prison sentences ranging from four to six years, U.S. Attorney Christopher J. Christie announced.

U.S. District Judge Anne E. Thompson also ordered SHAC (Stop Huntington Animal Cruelty) and the individual defendants to share in the payment of \$1 million in restitution to its victim, Huntington Life Sciences (HLS) of East Millstone, N.J.

Judge Thompson continued the sentencing hearing for three other SHAC members until tomorrow and next Tuesday.

The defendants sentenced today – Kevin Kjonaas, Lauren Gazzola and Jacob Conroy – remain free on bail and must surrender to the federal Bureau of Prisons within 30 days. There is no parole in the federal system, and defendants must serve nearly all of their custodial sentence.

On March 2, a federal jury convicted the corporate entity SHAC USA, Inc. and the six SHAC members on all respective counts against them for their roles in a campaign to terrorize officers, employees and shareholders of HLS, a publicly traded company that uses animals for laboratory research and testing. SHAC and its members also used the same tactics against other companies and their employees for doing business with HLS.

The case represented the first jury convictions of defendants charged under the federal Animal Enterprise Protection Act, designed to criminalize certain conduct aimed at companies involved in animal research and testing. The defendants were convicted of conspiracy to violate that act, as well as other charges, including interstate stalking, in their campaign against Huntington.

At trial the defendants attempted to disassociate themselves from the violent, threatening and intimidating tactics of SHAC. They also argued that much of their conduct was protected free speech under the U.S. Constitution. The jury rejected these arguments in finding all of the defendants guilty.

“There is nothing legitimate about inciting violence and intimidation against innocent people or companies conducting lawful business,” said Christie. “These are appropriately long prison sentences that should deter others from crossing the line from lawful protest to criminal conduct.”

The sentencings were as follows:

- Kjonaas, 28, the former president of SHAC, 72 months in prison.

- Gazzola, 26, the former SHAC campaign coordinator, 52 months in prison.
- Conroy, 30, a coordinator and SHAC's website manager, 48 months in prison.

Kjonaas, Gazzola and Conroy – and the corporate entity SHAC itself – each were convicted on all six counts of the indictment as follows: Count One, Conspiracy to violate the Animal Enterprise Protection Act; Count Two, Conspiracy to Commit Interstate Stalking; Counts Three, Four and Five, each charging Interstate Stalking of specific victims; and Count Six, Conspiracy to Use a Telecommunications Device to Abuse, Threaten and Harass Persons.

Judge Thompson scheduled sentencing tomorrow at 9 a.m. for Joshua Harper, 31, of Washington State, SHAC's West Coast coordinator. Judge Thompson scheduled sentencing for next Tuesday for Andrew Stepanian, 27, the SHAC New York coordinator; and Darius Fullmer, 29, of Hamilton Township.

The stated goal of SHAC was to drive HLS, a publicly traded company, out of business through its so-called “direct action” against HLS and individuals that SHAC designated as targets. SHAC directed its campaign largely via its websites, where it posted and applauded acts of extreme harassment, intimidation, vandalism and violence against HLS, its employees and others.

The SHAC websites encouraged and incited SHAC members and followers to direct their intimidation, harassment and violence against HLS and its targeted employees, as well as secondary targets – companies and employees who did business with HLS – in an often successful attempt to get those companies to end their business relationships with HLS.

Testimony from victims revealed that SHAC and its organizers routinely posted personal information on their websites, including the names, addresses and phone numbers of employees of HLS and other targeted companies and their employees. Other information published on the Internet included names of employees' spouses; the names and ages of their children and where the children attended school, even in some instances teachers' names; license plate numbers and churches attended by employees and their families and more.

Victims of the SHAC campaign, several of whom testified at trial, often endured vandalism of their homes in the dark of night, including rocks being thrown through windows, cars being overturned, messages in red paint plastered on their homes and property, unrelenting bullhorn protests in front of their homes and harassment of neighbors.

Acts of violence and vandalism applauded on the SHAC website included:

- overturning the car of an HLS employee in the driveway of his New Jersey home, vandalizing another car and throwing rocks through windows of person's home in 2001.
- smoke-bombing the offices of two companies in Seattle, Wash. on July 10, 2002, resulting in the evacuation of two high-rise office buildings.
- destruction of putting greens at Meadowbrook Golf Club in Long Island, New York where SHAC had announced that a director of a company that provided insurance services for Huntingdon was scheduled to be for a golf tournament in the summer of 2002.
- other targeted companies endured office invasions, "black fax" attacks, company website denial-of-service attacks, phone blockades and other acts of harassment and vandalism.

Part of the stated mission of SHAC was to "operate outside the confines of the legal system," according to their website. SHAC encouraged "direct actions" against HLS, other companies and employees that included its "top 20 terror tactics" to intimidate and harass and to destroy personal and real property, as described on its websites.

The corporate victims of SHAC's campaign included an insurer, financial services and investment firms as well as California, New York and New Jersey pharmaceutical companies.

The "top 20 terror tactics" implicitly encouraged the invading of offices, vandalizing property and stealing documents; physical assault, including spraying cleaning fluid into someone's eyes; smashing windows of a target's home or flooding the home while the individual was away; vandalizing or firebombing cars and bomb hoaxes; and threatening telephone calls or letters, including threats to kill or injure someone's partner or children.

The case was prosecuted by Executive Assistant U.S. Attorney Charles McKenna and Assistant U.S. Attorney Ricardo Solano.

Christie applauded the tireless work of Special Agents of the FBI, under the direction of Special Agent in Charge Leslie Wiser, Jr., in Newark, the New Jersey State Police, under the direction of Colonel Rick Fuentes, and the U.S. Attorney's Offices for the Districts of Minnesota and Arkansas and the FBI in Minnesota, Seattle and Little Rock.

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